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6 Representation in polycrisis: Towards a new research agenda for EU citizens

Abstract: In the last 15 years, crises have been plentiful in the European Union (EU): the Great Recession, the Eurozone crisis, the ‘migration crisis’, the climate crisis, the Brexit crisis, the rule of law crisis, the Covid-19 crisis, and the Russian war on Ukraine just to name the most prominent ones. This chapter argues that this constant state of polycrisis is actually connected to an underlying crisis of political representation in the EU and its member states. This crisis manifests itself in dwindling linkages between parties and voters, changing lines of political conflict along a multidimensional polycleavage and a growing tension between responsibility and responsiveness.

Following this argument, this chapter explores the questions of who represents whom, on what and how in the EU, both from a legal and political perspective. In doing so, it discusses conceptual and theoretical innovations to reframe political representation in the multilevel system of EU governance beyond the supranational – intergovernmental divide. It finds that the actual empirical practice of representation is much more multidimensional than expected and goes well beyond the artificial dichotomy of national vs. European interest representation. There is polyrepresentation in the polycrisis, in that we find patterns that cut across borders and institutional channels of representation.

The chapter concludes by proposing three innovative avenues for future research on representation in an EU under strain. Scholars should investigate: (1) polyrepresentation as a multidimensional phenomenon, (2) justification and communication alongside representation, and (3) the demand side of political representation, i.e. what kind of representation citizens want.

Keywords: European Union, polycrisis, representation, responsiveness, citizens.

The EU’s polycrisis as a crisis of representation

For the last 15 years, the European Union (EU) seems to have been in a constant state of “polycrisis” (Juncker 2016). The global financial and economic crisis of 2008 quickly turned into the Eurozone crisis as an unprecedented sovereign debt crisis. In 2015, the EU struggled to respond collectively to refugee and migration surges and continues to struggle to this day. Shortly after, Brexit dramatically altered the image of an ever-growing union and the stability of the EU as a political

system. The Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine are the most recent crises, while democratic backsliding in member states such as Hungary and Poland or the climate crisis have long been ongoing.

While these crises differ in their origins, nature, and consequences, they share a common feature: they are linked to a deeper *crisis of political representation in the European Union and its member states* (Mair 2009). The polycrisis and its management have revealed and fuelled contestation and polarization in European societies including the rise of anti-EU and radical right populist parties that have become endemic in the EU multilevel political system (Hobolt & de Vries 2016; Treib 2021). Questions of transnational solidarity (Cinalli et al. 2021; Grasso & Lahusen 2018; Schelkle 2017; Wallaschek 2020) are linked to questions on “who gets what”, but increasingly so on “who is one of us?” (Hooghe & Marks 2009: 16; 2018). In that sense, the polycrisis has revealed what Zeitlin et al. (2019) term a “polycleavage” with multiple, interrelated conflict lines emerging from the various crises, their specific problems, and contexts. At the same time, these crises “feed each other, creating a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the minds of our people” (Juncker 2016).

This sense of doubt and uncertainty (sometimes anger and frustration) is linked to a crisis of representation in the EU and its member states that is both old and new. It is old because its characteristics have long been identified. It is new because specific crises have put these characteristics under the spotlight. According to Brause and Kinski (2022), the crisis of representation has three interrelated elements – *dwindling linkage, changing lines of political conflict, and the well-known tension between responsibility and responsiveness*.

With membership in political parties and organizations steadily in decline, ‘catch-all’ parties lose their *linkage* to society (Hagevi et al. 2022; Van Biezen et al. 2012; Van Biezen & Poguntke 2014). Also, this makes interest aggregation and responsiveness increasingly difficult because remedies focus on representing majorities to the detriment of other societal groups (Traber et al. 2022). Additionally, the diversification of societies and representative actors leads to new forms of representation outside of traditional political and organizational channels (Castiglione & Warren 2006; Kröger & Friedrich 2012). The problem is that these old and new channels of representation may rather ‘collide’ than ‘cohere’ in the EU multilevel system (Lord & Pollak 2010).

As a second element of the crisis of representation, political cleavages in European societies have long been shifting away from the traditional economic left-right cleavage with the emergence of a cultural cleavage between “cosmopolitans” and “communitarians” (Zürn & de Wilde 2016). These shifting cleavages are inextricably linked to the transnationalization of politics and societies (Hooghe & Marks 2018; Kriesi et al. 2006). Especially in the EU with its strong economic and

political interdependence, and many political actors, decisions can have far-reaching (and asymmetric) consequences on EU citizens across national borders. With the European integration of so-called “core state powers” (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs 2014) linked to national sovereignty, territory and identity, European integration and cultural demarcation become increasingly contested.

Finally, elected representatives in the EU must manage the tension between responsibility and responsiveness in normal and especially in crisis times. They need to be responsive to their voters, but also responsible for their legal and political commitments in the EU context (and beyond) (Mair 2009). Scholars argue that the gap between responsibility and responsiveness is growing, while political actors are at the same time struggling more and more to close it in an interdependent EU and a globalized world (Bardi et al. 2014; Karremans & Lefkofridi 2020).

Arguably, the various crises have accentuated and fuelled these developments. For example, during the Great Recession, social democratic parties in Western Europe in fact supported strict budgetary discipline and austerity policies (although, they did move to the left on welfare state policies and opposition to economic liberalism) (Bremer 2018). High (youth) unemployment rates, especially in Southern European countries (di Napoli & Russo 2018), aggravated the perceived gap between responding to citizens’ needs and ‘saving the Euro’. “It is therefore a matter of nothing more and nothing less than preserving and proving the European idea. This is our historic task, because *if the euro fails, Europe fails*” (Merkel 2010: 4126 B).

At the same time, mainstream political parties are struggling to aggregate and represent citizens’ interests on cultural issues and European integration (Lefkofridi 2014), a representative void that specifically right-wing populist (anti-EU) parties tend to capitalize on (see contributions in Hawkins et al. 2019). The Brexit vote pitted so-called ‘losers of globalization’ against its winners (Hobolt 2016), and while we saw a containment rather than contagion effect on EU public opinion with regard to exiting the EU (De Vries 2017; Hobolt et al. 2022), anti-EU, -immigration, and -establishment sentiments drove leave voters (Hobolt 2016). We know that attitudes towards the Covid-19 pandemic and climate crisis are related to anti-establishment sentiment, distrust in science, and conspiratorial thinking that are, in essence, inextricably linked to populist attitudes (Eberl et al., 2021; Huber et al. 2021). Ultimately, this crisis of representation is to a certain extent about (not) feeling represented (Vik, de Wilde 2021). Certain groups of the European population feel under-represented, especially those with less formal education and members of the working class (Holmberg 2020).

While the polycrisis has been a challenge to representative democracy in the EU, the EU as a political system has been remarkably resilient in the face of all these crises, and we have even seen a deepening of integration as a result. Theories

of European integration provide different, oftentimes contradictory explanations for these crisis-induced reforms (e.g. Niemann & Ioannou 2015; Schimmelfennig 2015, 2018), but three more general observations seem important to include from a crisis of representation perspective.

First, the EU's response to the polycrisis has been characterized as a “failing forward” (Jones et al. 2016; Scipioni 2018; see also contributions in Jones et al. 2021) where incomplete and incremental reforms are preferred over both far-reaching and absent reforms. With this kind of “sticking plaster” approach (Howarth & Quaglia 2021: 1556), integration moves forward, but oftentimes does not solve underlying causes of the crises, like asymmetries in the governance of the Economic and Monetary Union, for example. The downside of this approach is that it is detrimental to EU public support as it further fuels the perception of the EU in a constant state of crisis. It is one thing for immediate crisis management to be patchy, it is quite another for long-term reform.

Second, this retreat of the “permissive consensus” on EU integration (Lindberg & Scheingold 1971), that is citizens' benevolent ignorance of EU affairs, and the deeper crisis of representation, have important implications for how national governments (can) act at the EU level. The theory of postfunctionalism attests a “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe & Marks 2009), a growing public dissatisfaction with EU politics that hampers integration. The theory of new intergovernmentalism (Bickerton et al. 2015) is even more pessimistic in that “it sees divides between integrationist leaders and a sceptical public as fuelling a *destructive dissensus* that casts doubt on the future sustainability of the EU” (Hodson & Puetter 2019: 1154, emphasis added). New intergovernmentalists essentially argue that national executives struggle to balance responsibility with responsiveness. On the one hand, they move integration forward during crises, often through summit diplomacy and informal channels. On the other hand, they are aware of the representative crisis at home. Their claim is that “national executives in Europe often seem to identify more with one another than with their own populations” (Bickerton et al. 2015: 710–11).

In a version of her famous argument, Schmidt (2019) argues that we have seen “politics without policy” at the national level and “policy without politics” at the EU level before the polycrisis. We now even witness what she calls “politics *against* policy” and even “politics *against* polity” both by national and EU level actors who act destructively (see also Ripoll Servent 2019; Ripoll Servent & Panning 2019). Now all this sounds rather pessimistic, but a more optimistic take follows when we investigate the actual practice of political representation in the EU multi-level system in times of polycrisis.

Polycrisis, polycleavage ... polyrepresentation?

Before we can discuss what is *new* in political representation in the EU, we need to define what political representation is. According to the well-known classic by Pitkin (1967), it has four distinct, yet connected elements. *Formal representation* refers to institutional mechanisms of authorization and accountability. How do we elect our representatives and how can we hold them accountable? *Descriptive* and *symbolic representation* are what Pitkin calls representation as “standing for” the represented (Pitkin 1967: 59). It tells us what the representatives must be like in order to represent. Descriptive representatives share certain characteristics and life experiences with those they represent, e.g., women, ethnic minorities or minorities of sexual orientation. In symbolic representation, politicians use symbols, political rhetoric or style to create a representative connection and the *feeling* of being represented. Finally, *substantive representation* as “acting for” (Pitkin 1967 59) refers to what representatives actually *do* to represent, e.g., policy output and its congruence with citizens’ demands.

The so-called “standard account of political representation” (Castiglione & Warren 2006) has a straightforward answer to the questions of who can be a representative, whom they represent, and how this representation takes place. An electorate defined by territory and citizenship democratically elects a representative who is then accountable and responsive to their interests and preferences. This view is very much state- and election-centred, but agnostic towards alternative forms of representation beyond the nation-state and beyond elections.

Formally, the EU is a mixed representative system between a federal state and a confederation of states whose “functioning (...) shall be founded on *representative democracy*” (Article 10.1 TEU, emphasis added). The supranational channel of representation in which “Citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament” is supplemented by the intergovernmental channel of representation in which “Member States are represented in the European Council by their Heads of State or Government and in the Council by their governments, themselves democratically accountable either to their national Parliaments, or to their citizens.” (Article 10.2 TEU).

At first glance, this suggests a clear division of labour as to who represents whom: *National citizens* are represented at EU level through their national governments, which, in turn, are accountable to their national parliaments. The Lisbon Treaty saw an upgrade of national parliaments becoming formal players at the EU level both individually and collectively (Auel & Neuhold 2017). For the first time, they were explicitly acknowledged as key institutions within the main body of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) with the task to “contribute active-

ly to the *good functioning* of the Union” (Article 12 TEU, emphasis added). *European citizens* are directly represented at the EU level through elections to the European Parliament (EP), whose constant empowerment as co-legislator has led scholars to conclude that it has, in fact, become quite a “normal parliament in a polity of a different kind” (Ripoll Servent & Roederer-Rynning 2018: 1).

When we look at the EU institutions, the Treaties are again rather explicit on whom and how they should represent. Article 171 TEU, for example, stipulates that the “Commission shall promote the general interest of the Union.” Article 173 continues that the members of the Commission “shall be chosen on the ground of their general competence and European commitment from persons whose independence is beyond doubt. (...) the members of the Commission shall neither seek nor take instructions from any Government or other institution, body, office or entity.”

Empirical research into whom and how Commissioners represent paints a much more nuanced picture. This representation includes national alongside European interests, portfolio and party as well as institutional interests (Egeberg 2006; Mérand 2021). What is more, the Commission pays attention to what citizens find important (Koop et al. 2022). It even increasingly seeks public opinion through commissioning Special Eurobarometers on many issues (Haverland et al. 2018), and picks up election pledges of the Europarties (Kostadinova & Giurcanu 2018), the European umbrella organizations of national parties outside the European Parliament (European Parliament 2014; on recent reforms, see Díaz Crego 2022). They work closely together with their related political groups formed by the members of the EP (EUR-Lex 2022).

Formally, the Council of the EU (Article 16 TEU) is an intergovernmental institution in which we expect national governments to be responsive to what their citizens at home want. Research again shows that the empirical practice of representation is more complex. We find different “modes of responsiveness” towards national citizens (Wratil 2018). Governments respond to public opinion when European integration is domestically salient (Hobolt & Wratil 2020; Hagemann et al. 2017), while ministers’ party affiliations also influence their voting behaviour in the Council (Mühlböck & Tosun 2018).

In the EU’s polycrisis, many have argued that the European Council (EUCO) (Article 15 TEU) has become the main decision-maker, moving away from its treaty-mandated role as the agenda setter. Intergovernmental co-ordination in response to the Eurozone crises, for example, sidelined both Commission and EP. Traditional legislative channels were avoided and “de novo” bodies such as the European Central Bank (ECB) received more executive power (Bickerton et al. 2015: 705). New leadership approaches to crisis governance contradict this narrative of EUCO power, highlighting how the Commission slowly reinterpreted exist-

ing rules to empower itself with regard to banking supervision and the Covid Recovery Fund (Smeets & Beach 2022). Such research urges us to switch perspective from the high-level “control room” of the European Council to the “machine room” (Smeets & Beech 2022: 4) in which crisis solutions are forged and protected against intergovernmental interference.

The European Parliament (Article 14 TEU) is directly elected based on national lists, and members of the EP (MEPs) organize in transnational EP party groups along a left-right conflict line. This means they have two principals: their national party, which puts them up for election, and their European party, which controls offices in the EP (Mühlböck 2012). We see voting behaviour in EP party groups with clear and coherent policy alternatives along left-right and pro-anti-EU conflict lines (Lefkofridi & Katsanidou 2018). Increasing polarization and fragmentation in the EP (Fenzl et al. 2022; Ripoll Servent & Costa 2022), including the steady rise of Eurosceptic voices (Treib 2021), has made it increasingly difficult for the EP to play out its powerful position as co-legislator in most policy areas to represent European citizens’ interests. While the EP has been effectively sidelined during the Eurozone crisis (Rittberger 2014), the Covid-19 crisis has seen slow gain in power of the EP in Economic and Monetary governance (Fromage & Markakis 2022). When looking at the patterns of debate in the EP, we see that MEPs represent a diverse set of national and European citizens and groups, for example, on climate policy ambitions or the Covid-19 recovery fund (Kinski & Ripoll Servent 2022; Gianna et al. 2022).

Being fought on national grounds and less visibly, EP elections are still considered ‘second-order’ compared to national electoral contests, albeit to a lesser extent than in the past (Schmitt, Toygür 2016). The second-order thesis presumes that the turnout in EP elections is lower than in national elections. It also holds that there is no clear choice for citizens because they do not elect an EU government. The campaign focus is primarily on national rather than European issues. The *Spitzenkandidaten* process was introduced in 2014 to establish a more direct connection between EP elections and a ‘European government’. In this procedure, European political parties appoint lead candidates for Commission President ahead of the EP elections. According to Article 177 TEU, the European Council is proposes a candidate to parliament “[t]aking into account the elections to the European Parliament” which elects this candidate by majority. While Jean-Claude Juncker, *Spitzenkandidat* of the European People’s Party (EPP), was elected Commission President in 2014, the process failed in 2019 with Ursula von der Leyen, a non-*Spitzenkandidat*, becoming Commission President (Crum 2022).

The procedure had differing yet limited effects on visibility, turnout, and vote (Gattermann & de Vreese 2020; Gattermann & Marquart 2020; Hobolt 2014; Schmitt et al. 2015). As the transnational umbrella organisations at the European level, Eu-

roparties are to “contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union” (Article 10.4 TEU). While they are becoming better at realising this transnational partisan potential to represent EU citizens, they are not full-fledged parties in a system of transnational party competition (Kinski 2022; Pittoors 2022).

Finally, scholars have turned to national parliaments as a promising representative connection between national citizens and EU politics, establishing ownership and communicating EU affairs to their national electorates (Auel & Christiansen 2015; Auel & Höing 2015; Auel et al. 2016, 2018). Notably, members of national parliaments (MPs) represent not only national citizens in EU affairs but also national citizens from other EU member states (transnational representation), and an overarching European citizenry (supranational representation) (Kinski 2021; Kinski & Crum 2020). Contrary to the dominant narrative of national representation, these new representative linkages across and beyond national borders are especially prevalent during the Eurozone crisis. MPs combine national with non-national representative modes, in fact, narrowing the gap between responsiveness and responsibility.

Overall, we can conclude that there are many traces of polyrepresentation in the EU. We need to investigate actor behaviour beyond formal representation, and representation beyond policy congruence to see beyond entrenched representative paths. This allows us to move beyond artificial dichotomies between national and European representation or intergovernmental and supranational policy-making in the EU.

Conclusion: A new research agenda on polyrepresentation in the EU

Nowadays, both political theory and empirical practice have long outrun the narrow understanding of representation displayed in the aforementioned ‘standard account’ (e.g. Brito Vieira 2019; Castiglione & Pollak 2019; Mansbridge 2003; Saward 2010) focused on electoral representation and the nation-state. Surprisingly, when scholars and politicians think about responses to the polycrisis in the EU, they oftentimes stay within this standard account. There only seems to be a choice between two options for representation to work in the EU – it is either re-nationalising or supranationalising competencies. In his State of the Union speech (2017), then Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said, “We only had two choices. Either come together around a positive European agenda or each retreat to our own corners.” In this view, for representation to work democratically in the EU,

it is either reverting back to national sovereignty and guarding core state powers or strengthening the Community Method.

There are many well-known proposals on how to narrow the representation and democracy gaps in the EU by means of strengthening input, throughput and output legitimacy (for an overview see Neuhold 2020; Weiler 2012; for the different legitimacy types Schmidt 2013). These include participatory and deliberate formats, such as the recent Conference on the Future of Europe (Puntscher Riekmann 2022), which aim to foster input legitimacy as government *by* the people. Throughput legitimacy refers to procedural mechanisms of accountability, transparency, and inclusiveness (Schmidt & Wood 2019), such as empowering the European as well as national parliaments (Bellamy & Kröger 2014; Goetze & Rittberger 2010). Output legitimacy is the effectiveness of governance outcomes and performance *for* the people (Lindgren & Persson 2010; Toshkov 2011). This section will not re-iterate these proposals but instead offer a new research agenda for scholars researching representation in the EU and also policymakers who represent citizens in the EU. I make three distinct proposals for future research:

1. Investigate polyrepresentation as a multidimensional phenomenon: As we have seen, representative patterns are more diverse than the ‘standard account’ would have us believe. Members of national parliaments represent transnational constituencies with whom they do not have an electoral connection. European Commissioners define ‘the European interest’ in various ways depending on their portfolio or national interests. MEPs go far beyond the national vs. European interest representation and claim to represent future generations, different social groups and business interests. We cannot simply assume a political actor’s representative behaviour to follow a representative mandate, merely because she is a member of a specific institution. At the same time, we know virtually nothing about the representative patterns in institutions that do not primarily have a representative mandate, for example, the European Central Bank (ECB) or the European Court of Justice (CJEU). How do they navigate the tension between responsibility and responsiveness in the EU in a time of increasing politicization (Blauberger & Martinsen 2020; Blauberger et al. 2018)? Essentially, who represents whom, on what, how and why in the EU?

To tackle all these questions, we need to refute the perception of these institutions as unitary actors in EU governance, and instead focus on the actor-level of political representation. Who do these actors (claim to) represent, how do they reconcile tensions between different constituencies and their interests in the multilevel EU system, and why do they choose to represent the way they do? The actor-level focus naturally includes institutional contexts and diverse types of actors, from parties to unelected representatives, and beyond. Party and representation scholars share the diagnosis of a crisis of representation and investigate similar

questions surrounding it, while the literatures are oftentimes surprisingly disconnected. When we zoom in to the actual empirical practice of representation in the EU, we see that multiple actors establish new representative linkages, reconcile multiple cleavages and may, in fact, narrow the gap between responsibility and responsiveness in crisis times. In addition to such empirical investigations, this also signals for an update to our conceptual and theoretical toolkit beyond the standard account and the two go-to options in EU politics (Kinski 2021; Wolkenstein & Wrátil 2021).

2. *Investigate justification and communication alongside representation*: Pitkin already notes that representatives must always communicate and justify their decisions, especially when there is a conflict between what representatives do and what citizens want. Representatives “must not be found persistently at odds with the wishes of the represented without *good reason* in terms of their interest, without *good explanation* of why their wishes are not in accord with their interest” (1967: 209–10, emphasis added). Democratic representation needs to be visible and representatives need to be publicly accountable for their actions. The longstanding focus on formal representation and substantive representation as preference or policy congruence has clouded our views from the communicative dimension of representation. How do political actors frame, justify and explain their representative efforts vis-à-vis their peers and those they represent (Lord 2013)? Such discursive justifications were significantly important in the context of the EU’s poly-crisis, in which decisions were frequently at odds with many EU citizens’ wishes. Here, we can use manual content analysis methods (De Wilde 2020; Wendler 2016) alongside recent advances in quantitative text analysis to capture crisis communication (Eisele et al. 2021). These methods use the many texts that are by-products of the political process and allow us to investigate the communicative dimension of representation in the EU, which is especially important during crises.

3. *Investigate the demand side of political representation*: Finally, the focus has so far been on the supply side of representation, and we have neglected its demand side (for a notable exception see Werner 2019a, 2019b). There are, of course, many comparative surveys asking citizens about their ideological positions, voting preferences, and party affiliations, but there is very little public opinion research on their actual *representative preferences*. What qualities do they expect of their representatives? Do they prefer a certain style of representation? Do they recognize the tensions between responsibility and responsiveness? Do they want their representatives to stick to their election pledges or respond effectively to crises? Under which conditions do they feel represented (Vik & de Wilde 2021)? Focusing on these questions is essential to filling in our blind spot towards what EU citizens expect of their representatives in a multilevel system. It helps narrow gaps in representation from the side of the citizen .

As we have seen, the constant state of polycrisis in the EU is linked to an underlying crisis of political representation in the European Union and its member states with dwindling linkages between parties and citizens, changing lines of political conflict, and a growing tension between responsibility and responsiveness. At the same time, we see innovative representative linkages across the polycleave and beyond the intergovernmental and supranational channels, narrowing the gap between responsibility and responsiveness. Scholars must seize that opportunity and explore this polyrepresentation in an EU under strain.

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